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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques the consumerization of schooling and knowledge, then looks at the ways in which Chicano students have lashed out against consumption in their education. From early childhood education to the university, U.S. schooling is ensconced in the capitalist notion of the marketplace. Within the marketplace of schools, the curriculum is composed solely of items for student consumption. The emphasis on student as consumer produces a dehumanizing education that does not give students the opportunity to understand aspects of their humanity, such as spirituality. The response of some Chicano students to this education was revealed by examination of annual conferences of MEChA (El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan)--a Chicano student political organization--which show a dramatic shift in interest toward spirituality and indigenous roots. These students have turned inward and are looking to their own history and culture for a means of redefining notions of education and success. They have integrated spirituality into their education in an effort both to gain a stronger sense of humanity and to move towards a place where they can empower their communities and help other Chicanos. Lessons learned from Chicano students can be applied to the university itself. In particular, Chicano studies is a perfect location in which to develop a spiritualized grounding to intellectual inquiry, redefine notions of success, and allow space for creativity in the learning process. By this means, the academy can contest its own consumerization and empower students. (Author/SV)

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Transforming Curricular Consumption and Dehumanization: Chicana/o Spiritualization and the Curriculum

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Abstract
After critiquing the consumerization of schooling and knowledge (both on a societal level and through a personal history), this paper looks at the ways in which certain Chicana/o students have leveled their own agency and lashed out against consumption in their education. They have turned inward and looked to their own history and culture for a means of redefining popular notions of education and success. These students have integrated spirituality into their education in an effort to both gain a stronger sense of humanity (drowned out by popular culture's emphasis on capital) and to move towards a place where they can empower their communities and help other Chicanas/os. The paper concludes by applying the lessons learned from Chicana/o students to the university itself. In particular, the focus is on Chicana/o studies and how it is a perfect location in which to: develop a spiritualized grounding to intellectual inquiry (centered in the pursuit of improving the human condition), redefine notions of success, and allow space for creativity in the learning process. This is the means by which the academy can contest its own consumerization and empower students.

Introduction
Schooling, as it exists in the United States (from early childhood education to the university), is ensconced in the capitalist notion of the marketplace. Universities, for example, compete for and buy students, while students shop for and buy an "education" as a means towards greater access to financial rewards. At the same time, particularly since the Nation at Risk report, business has an ever-increasing presence in the formation of educational policy. This presence is manifested through: 1) attempts to create a "free market" of schools, and, 2) strict guidelines as to what information/knowledge and skills are needed for student consumption so as to produce more efficient workers/consumers. This consumerization of the curriculum is the impetus for this paper.

Within the marketplace of schools, the curriculum is a critical site for the continued capitalist evolution of the consumption of "knowledge." The curriculum's central purpose has become to provide students with the cultural capital, both at conscious and sub-conscious levels, to become effective consumers (of information). In accordance, the school curriculum, in its most common and basic form, is composed solely of items for student consumption. Even those who debate how best to shape and improve the educational future of our children have lost sight of the fact that education can be more than the buying and selling of information--contemporary educational debates are steeped in the politics of consumption as seen by the fact that these controversies are centered on whose works we should "consume" (e.g. the great works and multicultural debates), rather than on how the works can be enacted as part of a critique to help us better understand our world as we attempt to improve it. In fact, schooling-as-consumption is so prevalent and dominant that even in those instances when potentially humanizing curricular materials are incorporated (such as in the common use of Paulo Freire's work), they are again treated as information to be consumed rather than used as the impetus for engaging in critical reflection and discourse on the university and its dehumanizing tendencies.

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The emphasis within schools and through the curriculum on the student-as-consumer produces an education which is little else but dehumanizing. For while the traditional function of schools in consciously preparing students for their role as consumers and as part of the production process was itself dehumanizing, this capitalization of both life and of schooling has rapidly evolved to the point where now life itself (and therefore education) is consumption. Information/knowledge is either something to be consumed as a means towards the ends of financial success or as a starting point for creating new information for others to consume.

This consumption-model is so totalizing that contestation itself is most often defined by it. Student agency is limited by the fact that the consumerization of students' minds is so complete that it restricts acts of opposition almost entirely to those which exist within the realm of the subject-as-consumer. For example, students are trained to be consumers from a very early age (as early as they can watch television). Through this training, via popular culture and the media, they learn that consumption is important and necessary as the primary means towards pleasure: one cannot find happiness without the right toys, clothes, computer, music, plastic surgeon, car, *information*, and only with these things can we attain the pre-packaged, Miss America, Dallas Cowboys, information superhighway, *now*, Disneyland of "success." Thus, the fact that students learn to be consumers-in-pursuit-of-pleasure often leads towards disinterest in anything not directly connected to this pleasure (such as school). In some cases, however, this logic is re-conceived as students are taught by their parents that the consumption of school information is an indirect path towards pleasure via eventual financial success.

Clearly, the current curricular and pedagogical model of informational consumption not only dehumanizes the student but severely limits the possibility for non-consumer, student agency. In short, students are socialized in a world where knowledge is simply one of a myriad of items for consumption. As suggested through: educational debates, business involvement in influencing new curricular standards and in creating a marketplace of schools, student contestation, and curricular "innovation," the school curriculum does not provide the opportunity for students to understand their humanity--their spirituality, for example, remains an ever distant, unnecessary ritual and remnant of their ancestors.

The power of individual agency, however, is not totally re-directed through those multi-faceted attempts to consumerize students' minds. There are, in fact, sites of humanistic resistance to consumer-based curricula that shine a hopeful light on the future of our schools. After engaging in personal reflection on the consumerization of schooling, I will turn to an example of this resistance.

The Reality of Educational Consumption

This paper is grounded less in theoretical discussions of capitalist hegemony than it is in personal experiences and the subsequent revelations. For that reason, I am going to engage in a brief autobiographical introspection to explicate the argument.

As a child in school, my primary inspiration for educational success was my father. Growing up in California's San Joaquin Valley, my father worked in the fields and came face-to-face with a number of manifestations of the racism prevalent in that area in the 1940s and 50s along with the corresponding economic hardships experienced by Chicanas/os. He came to believe in the importance of education for economic advancement and instilled in me this understanding. As a result, I saw the need to perform well in school and quickly realized that this meant listening, absorbing the information being provided and reproducing that information in the various different forms needed to reveal that I had learned successfully. I can remember times when I learned things that were interesting to me, but I also remember not feeling any connection between this interest and my goal as a student. That goal was always to prove my knowledge so as to become eligible for acceptance into the next level of education, which would eventually lead me towards success

and financial stability. Being completely outcome-directed in my approach to schooling, I was not concerned with knowledge retention nor with personal development beyond that which was necessary to attain what had become, for me, a hollowed out notion of "success." Because of his own experiences, my father had emphasized the importance of knowing how to play the game and how to employ different strategies that would help me achieve that success, such that the strategies became what it was I learned best during my schooling.

I also remember, from an early age, always being vocally opposed to unfairness and wrongdoing, particularly that grounded in blatant biases (which I learned through my parents' example). I was often surprised and disgusted by our lack of "human"ity. The importance of this in my life, however, was always viewed separately from my schooling. I *learned* that the best way to do something about this inequality would be through my own success. This notion stuck with me until the end of my second year in college, when I realized that I could study what it was that truly interested me: contesting and transforming inequality. As I look back on it, however, I am amazed at how deeply ingrained the education-as-consumption model of schooling had been in my life. For even as I began, for the first time, studying what was truly interesting to me, I did not see the importance of acquiring knowledge for knowledge's sake as part of the basis for transformation. Rather, I still conducted myself in the same fashion I always had: playing the game, consuming information only for as long as it was needed, and pursuing the ends of "success." It was not until after I completed graduate school that I realized the contradiction in my own approach to schooling. I had not sought knowledge as part of the development of an understanding which can transform society, but rather saw myself as passing the steps necessary to obtain entry into those halls in which knowledge is created. In short, even as a very successful student whose primary concern was not financial gain, but rather social change, I was consumed by consumption. My intellectual individuality was erased before I ever realized its possibility.

Even more frightening, today's youth grow up in a world in which their training as consumers begins earlier, is much more complete and operates on a number of different levels. Children learn the connection between consumption and "pleasure" even before they go to school.

Unfortunately, this advanced consumerization is manifested in a variety of efforts to create a new marketplace of schools. Even the university is a key site in which this model is both taught and propagated. For example, I recently attended an introductory class at a major US university in which $700 in prizes were to be awarded to students. This money would be allocated to the students who produced the best work conducted in the class. Unbelievably, this was part of a departmental and university wide pilot program to encourage innovative ways of transforming the college classroom and rewarding students.

As I hinted earlier in the paper, there are a number of filters that operate to create different specific manifestations of the student-as-consumer (such as class, race, parental school experience and the like). The two most common outcomes are opposition and/or disinterest (amongst non-traditional students who see no *realistic* connection between schooling, consumption and the pleasure they are taught to seek, despite possible familial messages they receive to the contrary) and the pursuit of success (amongst upper and middle class traditional students whose parents have embedded in their children's consciousness the notion of the link between educational consumption and the attached, realistically-attainable eventual pleasure of financial success). There are, however, other manifestations that represent the revolutionary potential of human agency within totalizing structures of repression. I will turn to one of these now.

Chicana/o Spiritualization Through Indigenismo

While there are Chicana/o students who fit into both of the overly-generalized categories discussed above, there are others who have pursued "academic achievement" but found the corresponding promise of success and pleasure through their consumption of school knowledge to be empty.

These students have uncovered the lack of humanity in their school lives. Within the Chicana/o student population, the corresponding realization of the need for a spiritualization of the community has evolved rapidly over the past few years. Through indigenous spirituality movements (as manifested in community dance troupes, student organizations and even the indigenization of mainstream religion), the Chicana/o community has lashed out at the dominant university curriculum, not in a simple attempt at inclusion but in an effort to reclaim humanity and find a place in our world where consumption is not the core of existence.

In essence, the Chicana/o community has revolted against educational dehumanization and, in a variety of ways, sought spiritual rejuvenation at the expense of school and financial success. This spiritualization can inform our attempts at re-envisioning the university curriculum. Before I turn to this possibility, I want to discuss Chicana/o students' efforts at spiritualization.

I will look at just one example: the 1995 MEChA National Conference at UC Berkeley. MEChA, *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (The Chicano Student Movement of the Southwest) has been the leading Chicana/o student political organization since the late 1960s. Its historical emphasis has been to pursue educational changes (in the universities and communities) to improve the conditions of the Chicana/o community. My own involvement in MEChA as an undergraduate in the mid 1980s provides me with some inside historical knowledge about the organization. During my involvement, the emphasis in MEChA was on responding to educational problems facing the community in a variety of different ways. During the statewide conference we held in 1986 this was the focus of the majority of the workshops. There were no workshops dealing with spirituality or *indigenismo* (investigation and reclamation of the indigenous ancestry of Chicanas/os).

The 1995 Conference, however, revealed a dramatic shift. The conference was entitled "Decolonizing Our *Raza* [race]." While the motivating force behind this decolonization remained educational change for Chicana/o students, the path towards that goal had been re-conceived. The introductory materials provided to all of the participants explain this,

> For years now we have fought for political and economic power, but we have neglected our *poder spiritual* [spiritual power] [sic]. And, without our oral histories, traditions, community spirit, and languages, the greatness of what we are might as well be dead....
>
> Through keeping our ancient ways alive we can truly survive. After all, they emerged as survival techniques over the thousands of years that our *gente* [people] lived on this land and adapted to it and with it. Through our indigenous traditions we maintained the balance with this environment that was given to us to share and protect. But now our land is dying as respect for what is truly sacred is lost to materialism, capitalism, sexism, and racism. We have but one choice left, to reject the poison the invader has forced upon us - We must **De-Colonize our Raza**. [UC Berkeley MEChA, 1995, p. 4. Emphasis in the original.]

Typically, MEChA conferences are mainly composed of various workshop sessions. At the Berkeley conference, for example, there were roughly 36 different workshops (there were 73 including repeated workshops). Of these, 3 specifically dealt with Chicanas/os' indigenous roots while another 4 dealt directly with the notion of spirituality. Including repeated workshops, there were 9 dealing with indigenismo and 9 dealing with spirituality (25% of the total workshops).

This numerical breakdown, however, does not give any qualitative information with regard to student interests. Having attended the conference, I found that each of the spirituality workshops was packed, far better attended than others that dealt with things like MEChA Mentoring. The students were very interested in these workshops because, as one student put it, with regard to spirituality, "We're lost." Furthermore, the theme of indigenous spirituality was linked to key components of the conference as: each day began with a traditional "sunrise ceremony," all of the

workshops were described as talking circles, and decisions were made only in the talking circle (where hierarchy is eliminated and the use of Robert's Rules of Order [traditionally used in MEChA] abolished).

These MEChistas are not simply involved in identity politics and the reclamation of cultural symbols. Rather, they are seeking to fulfill a sense of community and spirituality that has been drowned out by contemporary popular culture and the models of consumption espoused therein. In addition, I found that many of the students were more than willing to sacrifice their academic "success" to maintain this link to some sense of humanity and community. Several students re-defined success such that they were not concerned with their grades but with understanding how the material in their courses shed light on their own humanizing, spiritual endeavors.

The reality, of course, is that Chicana/o students are simultaneously caught in a maelstrom of capital culture which exists in opposition to any notion of humanity/spirituality/community and which creates conflicting desires. So, while Chicana/o students provide hopeful insights, the reality of their existence makes these insights difficult to implement in any coherent fashion. The workshops at the conference provide a good example. For although they were conceptualized within the framework of the talking circle, most workshops were given in a lecture format where one person provided information as the others listened (followed by questions when time allowed). Furthermore, Chicana/o students' interests in *indigenismo*, as some students have told me, tends to wane as they complete their college careers and move on to graduate school or employment. In fact, many describe *indigenismo* as a phase. In many ways, this is true. To be more precise, however, the reality of living in our capitalized world makes it difficult to pursue a spiritualized, non-consumer identity and survive. Individuals are either consumers or, for all intents and purposes, they do not exist.

Still, both on conscious and sub-conscious levels, Chicana/o students are searching for some sense of collective, historical bonds that re-embody their humanity. In many ways they are mirroring the calls made by contemporary Chicana theorists such as Anzaldua, Castillo and Moraga. These authors all cover similar ground in calling for new efforts at establishing transformative Mestiza/Xicana, spiritually-centered identities that are informed by pre-Columbian notions of the duality of our beings. They too, see how far removed we are from humanity and suggest we look towards our ancestors for an understanding of who we are such that we can re-direct our daily lives to more accurately reflect our humanity. As with much theory, however, these discussions are far removed from the reality of the difficulties Chicana/o students encounter in their efforts to re-humanize themselves through the spirit.

Lara Medina, in some ways, bridges the gap between these Chicana theorists and the students previously described as she discusses decolonizing our spirits (1995 NACS Annual Meeting). Medina talks about the spiritual need she has seen in the Chicana/o community and the way in which individual spiritual leaders have tried to respond by developing our connection to each other, to the Earth and to the life forces through linkages to our sexuality and creativity.

It is within this notion of creativity that true hope lies. For in my conversations with Chicana/o high school and college students (for another project), they revealed a yearning for creative outlets. Many of these students had been or become disinterested in school because, as discussed earlier there was no need to engage in the consumption of school knowledge since no payoff existed. Nevertheless, student agency and resistance emerged as they discussed their need, neither for consumption nor for "success," but for avenues to explore their own creativities. As revealed earlier, this need was pursued by university students in their efforts to attain a spirituality that allowed for collective and individual expression not possible in the world of school.

These Chicana/o students explain the need to overcome not simply the colonization but the consumerization of our minds (through schooling) and of our spirituality (through religious

institutions). In some ways, Chicana/o students are the best equipped to engage in this process because many live life not just to live it but to transform it for their families and communities. These students can more easily respond to their underlying desire for creativity and spiritual connection/expression. Emma Perez discussed this power at the 1995 NACS meeting when she discussed desire as revolutionary. Perez talked about desire as the key to social change while explaining how it has been "tamed out of existence" in the university and dismissed as unscientific. These constraints have constricted us in academic traditions and disciplinary boundaries, Perez argues. The possibility of Chicano Studies provides a powerful hopefulness that may allow us to connect creativity, spirituality, desire and community to education and transformation; leading us away from schooling as consumption and towards redefined notions of "success."

Chicana/o Studies as a Model for Curricular Transformation: Learning from Chicana/o Students' Rebellion

Chicana/o Studies is an excellent avenue for educational and epistemological transformation through the curriculum. Since Chicana/o Studies was founded in opposition to traditional conceptions of schooling and knowledge, it already exists in a contestatory realm. It is grounded in the principles not only of inclusion but of ground-breaking, interdisciplinary inquiry. Unfortunately, the fact remains that early Chicana/o Studies practitioners and theorists were trained within traditional disciplines and thus, the actual implementation of Chicana/o Studies existed in contradiction to its designed objectives. For instance, many Chicana/o Studies programs were developed by scholars who focused on the analysis of the Chicana/o from their respective disciplinarily-bounded locations in the academy prior to Chicana/o Studies, such that actual interdisciplinary analysis was underdeveloped.

Still, the fundamental underlying principle of Chicana/o Studies is that it should challenge the academy to pursue intellectual inquiry that is transformative. Today's Chicana/o students, those who seek a spiritualization of their college experiences and those who seek creativity in their elementary and secondary schooling, are providing innovative suggestions as to how Chicana/o Studies might fulfill its original mandate.

There are several curricular ideas that come from the student interests described earlier:
1) *Redefining the Notion of Success:* Chicana/o Studies exists on the margin of the academy and does not fit neatly into any traditional conception of the academic discipline. It is, therefore, a perfect place in which to redefine the notion of success at the university. As the students have suggested, success need not be confined strictly to grades, but rather should incorporate the acquisition of a humanity that helps students understand not simply the fundamental social, political, economic, and other forces at work in the formation of Chicana/o identities but also the means by which this can be used to develop a stronger sense of community, creativity and spirituality to be invoked in change efforts.

2) *Developing a Spiritual Grounding to Intellectual Inquiry:* Chicana/o Studies is a key location for understanding the link between spirituality and humanity, and between religion and dehumanization. Given Chicana/o Studies' goal of trying to understand the formation of inequality and the need to apply that understanding to efforts at pursuing equality, a fundamental component of that investigation should be deconstructing the meaning of humanity. Within that deconstruction then, consideration must be given to the evolving conception of what being a human consists, which in turn is linked to traditional spiritual belief.

3) *Allowing for Creativity:* Given the persistence of our intellectual stagnation and the corresponding maintenance of the inequalities underlying the Chicana/o Studies project, creativity can be a critical component of the continual evolution of the field. As this paper has revealed through the analysis of student interest in spirituality, a more dialogical construction of the university learning environment--based on the belief that all participants in this intellectual project

have the potential of pushing us into crucial new sites of knowledge--would allow us to gain insight and direction from those who represent our intellectual future.

In essence, Chicana/o Studies classes can attempt to understand the social phenomena behind the status of Chicanas/os in this society as they relate to a sense of community, spirituality and traditional culture. Changes and transformation in society can be understood and interpreted through these lenses such that the students do not simply acquire information or skills, but rather become engaged in a process of transforming the nature of the academy and continually re-defining the "discipline" in the process. The emphasis in these classes should also be in the development of praxis: a key principle behind early calls for Chicana/o studies. For these classes should be embedded in the application of the knowledge obtained in efforts to make changes with others in the community.

Overall, curriculum, and schooling, should have as its central principle the pursuit of the improvement of the human condition. The curriculum should strive for an understanding of our world that can lead us towards becoming more fully human. It is not the intent of this paper to provide the reader with a detailed curriculum in Chicana/o Studies or any other field. Instead, it is simply an effort to reveal the need for and potential benefits of this transformation. As the students' own lives suggest, our location in the university and in the consumerized, capitalist world makes the real application of these ideas a true challenge. But just as there are individual students who are able to survive the contradictions of maintaining a spiritual, humanizing location in this consumer world, there are individual professors who can begin the shifts I have described.

Through this spiritualization, we can all begin the process of reclaiming our humanity and in so doing move beyond becoming mindless consumers and towards a spiritual revitalization that can be the contagion required for the educational and moral revolution demanded by both conservatives and liberals in recent commentary on and criticism of the degeneration of schooling and society.

In short, what the students and theoreticians discussed in this paper are calling for is application of the transformative power of love itself (similar to Perez's discussion of desire). It is love (of family, of culture, of humanity itself) which underlies the students' need for creative outlets that allow them to develop a sense of interconnectedness that is spiritually satisfying. It is also this concept that is the most revolutionary force at our disposal as we seek to transform the spiritually dead, consumerized schoolhouse of the late 20th century.

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